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## Alice

*(Scene—A comfortable room. Julius Crane, an invalid of many years' standing, rather stout, about fifty, though looking much older, is reposing in an arm-chair. He is at his eleventh reading of "Alice in Wonderland," but as a fever is beginning on him, the book has dropped on his lap. An ancient, raucous-voiced, exceptionally gifted parrot is perched in a far corner of the room.)*

Mr. CRANE: Ahoy there! Ahoy somebody! *(A silence.)*  
Ahoy, Ahoy, cook! *(A silence.)* I wish damn it they'd leave the phone within reach, when they go out.

*(A little red-headed boy appears. They stare at each other in silence for a moment.)*

Mr. CRANE: Who are you?

BOY: I does the dishes.

CRANE *(Sternly)*: What do you mean by that? Explain yourself!

BOY: The cook, she gimme ten cents an' I washes the dishes.

CRANE: How old are you? How much do you know?

BOY: My name's Bill.

CRANE: Well, here's ten cents. Vanish through that mirror and go play with Alice. And if you find her tell her to show her face at the glass for a minute, only for a moment. Tell her she'll be better than a barrellful of doctors. *(He says, "Yes, sir," and makes for the door.)* Come back! I've something important to say. *(He obeys. A silence.)* You say your name's Bill; have you ever been in a chimney?

BILL: I was in a chimney once with me father when he was cleaning a chimney.

CRANE: Ah Bill, then you're the lizard. Repeat some poetry.

BILL *(A silence)*: It goes this way. It's a piece a lady taught me once, it goes:

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,  
How I wonder what you are,  
Up above the world so high,  
Like a diamond in the sky.

CRANE: Oh, pshaw! You said it right from beginning to end. Place that phone here on my table before you leave. (*He tries to obey, but the cord is not long enough.*) Well, then, call up 12345BB.

BILL: I dunno how.

CRANE: It's this way; seat yourself on the chair, take that piece of wood off the hook, place it on your ear and when you hear "hello," speak into the tube as follows: 12345BB. But mind, when you hear "hello" a second time, say: "This is Mr. Crane," and await my orders.

BILL (*Obeys*): 12345BB. (*A silence.*) This is Mr. Crane and await my orders.

CRANE: "Oh, Tucker," tell him, "oh, Tucker, send me a good book to read."

BILL: Oh, Tucker, send him a good book to read. (*A silence*) I does the dishes . . .

PARROT: My beautiful Annabel Lee.

BILL: He ses how's your foot and back.

CRANE: Tell him my foot and back are alright and repeat what I told you before.

BILL: Oh, Tucker, his foot an' back are all right, send him a good book to read. . . . He ses, "I'll send you some Van Dyke."

CRANE: (*Irritably*) Mush! mush! tell him. What's the man dreaming of? Van Dyke! Why he doesn't even go fishing—he goes a-fishing—a-fishing with an Izaak Walton in one hand and his friends in the memory. I'm condemned to this chair for life, tell him! When I go fishing in a book I want to see the streams, the trees, the mosquitoes at least not through a third pair of eyes. Seventh hand! Tell him he makes mush!

BILL: He ses you makes mush with one hand. You don't go fishing, he ses. He ses he wants to see the mosquitoes. . . .

CRANE: That'll do. Listen some more and repeat.

PARROT: . . . and of Wah, the demon king,  
Who sat upon his throne.

BILL: He ses, "What about another Jack London."

CRANE: Words! Words! Fine words! Live words, but he whips them to death. What's the use of harnessing words if you whip 'em to death? Don't they die? I don't want reality, I want something real. Tell him he needs harnessing.

BILL: He ses you needs harnessing. (*To Crane*) He ses, "I'll send you some Schnitzler that'll fill you with wonder."

CRANE: He's enough of a psychological juggler to juggle. They're not quite honest, tell him. If one result doesn't satisfy them they are satisfied with another. . . . why his soul's a little sick, too.

BILL: Or Strindberg, he ses.

CRANE: Sick, sick. Tell him he's sick.

BILL: He ses you're sick.

CRANE: "He," not "You!"

BILL: *You*, not me!

PARROT: But upon the shores of what ocean, O Maccabeus, was the stone rolled that hides them.

BILL: Please sir, it's another voice. It ses, "And oh dear, I do wish our Dinah were back! She's such a quiet thing."

CRANE: (*Softly*) Speak severely to the girl

And scold her when she misses,

She only does it to annoy

Because she knows it teases.

What do the voices say now?

BILL: I hears "kr kr kr kr" . . . It's another voice this time; it ses, "Oh you Kiddo!"

CRANE: (*Suddenly*) Give 'em Hell! man, give 'em Hell!

BILL: (*Suddenly*) Here here! Git outa this, wot the Hell, you big lazy bug . . . aw, come off your perch. . . .

CRANE: Bill, do you know what you are swearing about?

BILL: No sir.

CRANE: Be patient, lizard.

PARROT: Only, the wild duck's not sick. . . . Nor nor Hedda, Hedda.

BILL: It's come back now. It ses, "Hello hello, there's a new man called Tidore Dreisser—"

CRANE: Oh pshaw! How's a man in earnest to read Dreisser! Tell him I'd rather read Van Dyke. Tell him to come and see me and to go to the devil in the meantime. And hang up the receiver.

PARROT: Is dead, oh she is dead.

BILL: He ses to go to the devil and then come and see him. (*To Crane*) He ses, "I'll bring you some poetry."

CRANE: (*After feverishly drinking a glass of water*) Magic! Tucker, magic! magic! I want to roll, to bathe in it! I've been years

alone and what's real is my only solace. There's beauty all around us but it is like a sick dog when it gets on the page. Studies! studies! Everything's a study, a psychologic study, or a realistic study, or an imagistic or a scientific—damn them! have words lost their virtue utterly? Tell him! Tell him!

BILL: He's gone, sir.

PARROT: Bitter is my soul, but I love it; I love it because it is bitter, and because it is my soul.

CRANE. Here's ten cents. Vanish through that mirror and go play with Alice. If you find her tell her to bring the two Tweedles, Dee and Dum.

BILL: Yes Sir. (*Embarrassed*) I has a book at home a lady gimme once, it's called Treasure Island.

CRANE: What sort of a book is it?

BILL: It's a fine book, there's a man name Silver in it; it's about a ship an'—an' everything.

CRANE: Alas, my poor lizard, there are no more Silvers; only dreams that reality's real, too real for them. Fetch me that thermometer on the shelf.

BILL: It's too high up.

CRANE: You mean you're too small; it is a very good height indeed! What sort of a ship was it?

BILL: It was a ship—it had a lot of pirates in it. It was great.

CRANE: "Oh, the captain was not a plausible captain,  
His name was Mr. Lizzie,  
He scanned to right, he scanned to left, and suddenly  
humped up, whisp'd;  
"Lay low! lay low! The problem skies, the bumble  
mounds,  
I dare not call them easy."  
His voice was so hounded and wheasy  
That a general mopping plagued their brows,  
And even the fat man came out of his box  
And blew where it was breezy.

MRS. CRANE: (*Who has entered unobserved*) Why Julius, what are you trying to recite?

CRANE: It's not said right, I understand.

MRS. CRANE: It's wrong from beginning to end. Are you feverish again?

CRANE: Oh, a bicycle with a bit of celery's allright, if you feed it to cats.

MRS. CRANE: (*As doctor enters and greets them*) You're just in time, doctor, the fever's returned on him.

DOCTOR: His mind is extraordinarily lucid at such times.

(*As the doctor busies himself with Crane, she picks up a letter on his table and reads*):

My Dear Tucker: Magic! magic! Send me some. I am condemned to this chair for life; a man's senses in the literal solitude of the wilderness become preternaturally acute—well, you are living in the midst of affairs and you tramp your way through books, but in the moral solitude of my sick chamber I thread my way through them; my senses have become too superbly acute to stand anything but the things of enduring value. I do not mean I want what is impeccable—I want what is real. That book you sent me, "The Call of the Wild," is a weakling by the side of "Alice in Wonderland;" had it had half the *realness*, half the power, (yes, power) of Alice, I might have read it through, but my long, increasingly sensitive lonesomeness was back of my reading—its manly unrealities became a striving, a strain, a grimace of what is. Magic! You say you have found it in the new verse, the new poets. I fear you will try to induce me to think so. Don't; they are not new and they are the first to assert this, but they say it as advocates—at bottom they preen themselves on "new;" else, why such bustling propaganda? When verse is magically poetry, it may be misunderstood, but it needs no propaganda. All this glad fuss about poetic disillusionment is a little awry; all subjects are dead as an old shoe by the roadside till they get proper treatment, and in this they will agree—they will seemingly agree when you tell them that it does not matter whether a poet write about an old shoe, an elephant or a rose, and that one is as great as the other, but really, are they willing to see it? For of the three, the rose with them is utterly fallen into disrepute. *And it is not the rose's fault, Tucker!* There's a thing they forget. I detest the poet who will not look at a rose. Here's an old lady throws up her hands, horrified, at an old shoe in rhyme; it is the same gesture in both cases, the same fastidious old-fashioned attitude, but at least the old lady's gesture is without affectation.

The fastidiousness of the free-verser! He will not even look at a king. He will ignore the fact—diabolical inference!—that nothing in this world can be discarded, not even a beauty's blue eyes and golden hair. He has not yet pulled out the hair, but he is tugging at it. He will, Tucker! There was never less freedom than in the new freeness, that is why one poet resembles the other with such grievous monotony; I am not the only one to have remarked it. That comes of discarding things, Tucker; they find freedom through disillusionment and disillusionment through science; they are glad, too trans-

parently glad, to be disillusioned. Why, old ladies, in that case disillusionment becomes also an illusion; to exult in the process of poetic disillusionment, to sound its praises, to glare at facts with the cold eye of science! Bosh! Such a man is still on the enchanted side of the wall and his illusion is science. So they make a virtue of penning themselves in, and they make a virtue of it because they believe they are doing away with lines of demarcation, not at all penning themselves in; why the displaced lilies of the valley and the triumphant boots by the roadside? One is no more, no less, important than the other.

PARROT: I have been faithful to thee, Cynara.

They *will* have their liberty, though; they will tell you—let them—that music (a good half of poetry and another of their lost illusions) they have purposely discarded. But write without music and the attempt will become obvious, and the poem, O horrors! explicable. Explain Ullalume! What would Verlaine have said had he chosen to manacle himself modern fashion? Very little, I fear. He would have choked, Tucker! Magic! Alice's prosy words fall into their places and become inevitable—that is why it is only incidentally a book for children, never to be outworn, but where in free verse is there an inevitable succession of words? Don't tell me that Alice and free verse cannot be compared; magic words are poetry. Free verse should *be* there for the comparison, but only Alice is. I fear, Tucker, if we continue to imprison ourselves, in our striving for emancipation, as it is called, if through our restrictions to this, that and the other, and the application of a mood-ridden technique—all the more domineering because it is impalpable—if above all we hope, without music, to compete with our spiritual ancestors and hope—

PARROT: In Xánadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree,  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.

(Curtain)

—*Enrique Cross.*

